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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YAOUNDE 001007

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [CM](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: PRESIDENT BIYA'S DEMARCHE TO AMBASSADOR: FRIENDS
DON'T CRITICIZE

REF: A. YAOUNDE 175

[1](#)B. YAOUNDE 971

Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief Scott Ticknor for reasons 1.4 (d) and (e)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: On November 25, Cameroonian Foreign Minister Henri Eyebe Ayissi summoned Ambassador to his office to read her a message which he said was from President Paul Biya. The statement, written in French, affirmed that diplomats should not interfere with Cameroon's internal affairs, especially by publicly criticizing the Electoral Commission (ELECAM). ELECAM was "irreversible" and would be independent. U.S. assistance would be welcome. Biya's message took note of the Foreign Minister's November 13 speech to the diplomatic corps, which also demanded that diplomats not publicly criticize the government. Ambassador emphasized the importance of free and fair elections in 2011.

We are trying to obtain a copy of Biya's message (Ayissi did not provide us one). Para 8 suggests possible next steps here and in Washington. End summary.

Defining our Friendship

[1](#)2. (C) Biya's message began by affirming "the Department of State had communicated that Cameroon is a friendly country." Cameroon was sensitive to diplomatic statements made to the domestic and international media, noting "we want to avoid manipulation of public opinion by diplomats." Cameroon was in a delicate stage but there had been a misunderstanding of the government's approach. Diplomats should not interfere with internal affairs. "Cameroon C'est le Cameroon" (Cameroon is Cameroon. Note: this is a common Cameroonian saying. End note.) - it's not the U.S. or other African states, the message went on, adding that its institutions and "collective temperament" need to be accepted for what they are. This was essential for internal peace and to abide by the spirit of friendship between our countries.

With a Spotlight on ELECAM

[1](#)3. (C) This approach applied in particular to ELECAM, the message continued. It was important for the government position to be understood and for diplomats to realize the impact their statements on ELECAM had on peace and national and international opinion. ELECAM was entering a particularly sensitive, visible period heading into 2010. The message offered three specific points on ELECAM:

-- ELECAM was created as part of a long electoral reform process. ELECAM was created under an act of law; its officials are named and functions determined - this is "irreversible". ELECAM offices were being established around the country "normally" and ELECAM was operating "responsibly".

-- Friendly countries should keep opinions about ELECAM to themselves and judge the institution on what it does. They should not upset the process of creating ELECAM. The USG had made declarations on ELECAM but should now observe developments. USG logistical or other assistance to ELECAM would be welcome.

-- The President had instructed that ELECAM be independent and would monitor ELECAM to ensure this is the case. He demanded that international partners stop making critical declarations about the institution.

The November 13 Remarks

14. (C) The message made note of the Foreign Minister's remarks during a November 13 speech at an event for the diplomatic corps to honor "diplomatic friendship and solidarity". (Note: During this event, which Ambassador attended, the Foreign Minister delivered a similar message as this demarche, demanding that the diplomatic corps refrain from commenting on Cameroon's internal affairs. The speech came after the outgoing European Union Ambassador blasted the government in a press conference, criticizing the composition of ELECAM, the failure to release the 2005 census, and poor governance. End note.) The President's message said that the November 13 message was not aimed specifically at the United States but at the whole diplomatic corps; nonetheless, the U.S. had made critical public comments before. "In the interest of peace and friendship," foreign governments needed to keep within diplomatic norms of communication.
Ambassador's Response

YAOUNDE 00001007 002 OF 002

15. (SBU) Ambassador said we would take note of this message but that we have our point of view and want to share it at times. She stressed the importance we place on democratic and transparent elections in 2011.

Comment

16. (C) The Foreign Minister, who in the past has delivered tough messages with bluster and legalistic flair, this time appeared uncomfortable. He read from the text with very little eye contact and seemed somewhat flustered when Ambassador later raised other obviously important international issues such as the Iran nuclear program and the Copenhagen summit. He ended the meeting abruptly. When Ambassador took media questions afterwards, the one question from journalists was "did you discuss elections?" - an obviously planted question since there was no particular reason to be raising elections with the minister at this time.

17. (C) This demarche was odd on many levels. It is the first time President Biya has delivered a formal message to the Ambassador. We would not be surprised if similar messages are being delivered to other Ambassadors in a full-court effort to stifle diplomatic criticism, following similar efforts when the Foreign Minister lectured the entire diplomatic corps about ELECAM on February 19 (ref A) and November 13. This may reflect the lingering sting of the EU Ambassador's criticism. (Ambassador Garvey has been publicly critical in the past over the composition of the commission, which is largely composed of CPDM insiders. She has not made any statements on this matter in recent months.) It may also portend some new political move from Biya, such as advancing elections, although Ayissi assured Ambassador that presidential elections would be in 2011.

18. (C) In ref B, post argued for rethinking our relationship with Cameroon, with a harder hitting approach supported by Washington. We will consult with other Ambassadors here to see how widely Biya's message was

delivered and whether there is scope for some kind of joint response. We will also reach out to some contacts within the Presidency for insights into this demarche. Post suggests that, as the Department considers the engagement recommended in ref B, our concerns about this presidential message and about the need for neutrality in ELECAM be included among the key points.

GARVEY